

CLAIMS

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

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- 5      1.      A method of distributing products, using a wide area network, comprising  
the steps of:
- 10      receiving a request for a product from a consumer, wherein the consumer has a  
specific location,
- 15      determining an appropriate retailer to fulfill the request, wherein the retailer is  
determined based upon the location of the consumer and whether the retailer has physical  
stock of the product,
- 20      submitting the request to the retailer for subsequent fulfillment of the request, and  
maintaining an inventory management system for tracking of individual sales of  
product, wherein the inventory management system utilizes a tracking method comprising  
the steps of
- 25      receiving reports of shipments of products from manufacturers to retailers,  
receiving reports of sales of products from retailers to consumers, and  
reconciling the reports of shipments and the reports of sales to determine an  
accurate accounting of quantities of products actually sold to consumers.
- 30      2.      The method of claim 1 wherein the retailer is a retailer located in closest  
proximity to the location of the consumer that has physical stock of the product.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein the location of the consumer used to determine the appropriate retailer is a postal zip code.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein the fulfillment of the product is a method of fulfillment chosen from the group consisting of shipping the product to the consumer and allowing the consumer to pick up the product from the retailer.

5. The method of claim 1 wherein the fulfillment of the product is accomplished by allowing the consumer to pick up the product from the retailer, and further comprising the steps of:

- providing a copy of the request to the consumer, wherein the copy includes a code that is unique to the request, and
- providing the retailer with the code to enable the retailer to provide the consumer with the product when the consumer picks up the product.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein the receiving a request for product step is accomplished via a web based interface that enables a consumer to transmit the request for product.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein the web based interface is incorporated as a component of the inventory management system.

8. The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of:

providing a terminal at a retail location that is capable of communicating with the inventory management system using a wide area network,

receiving a request for a product at the terminal from a user of the terminal,

transmitting the request from the terminal to the inventory management system,

identifying a retail location that has stock of the product and that is located proximally to the user,

transmitting the identified retail location that has stock of the product from the inventory management system to the terminal, and

displaying the identified retail location to the user of the terminal via a display located on the terminal.

9. The method of claim 1 wherein the inventory management system is capable of processing of funds from retailers and consumers, wherein the processing of funds comprises the steps of:

receiving payment information from consumers for products shipped to the consumers from retailers,

converting the payment information received from the consumers to an electronic debit format if necessary,

receiving payment information from the retailers for products shipped from manufacturers to the retailers,

converting the payment information from the retailers to an electronic debit format  
if necessary, and

providing funds to the manufacturers after processing the payment information from  
the consumers and the payment information from the retailers.

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10. The method of claim 9 further comprising:

receiving payment information from factors for shipments of product sent from  
manufacturers to the factors and subsequently to the retailers,

converting the payment information from the factors to an electronic debit format if  
10 necessary, and

providing funds to the manufacturers after processing the payment information from  
the factors.

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11. The method of claim 9 wherein the payment information from the consumers  
is a type of payment chosen from the group consisting of credit card payments, debit card  
payments, automatic teller machine payments, smart card payments, cashier's check  
payments, money order payments, personal check payments, cybercash payments, and  
electronic debit payments.

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12. The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of:  
allowing the consumer to return the product to the retailer that fulfilled the  
consumer's request,

receiving a notification from the retailer that the consumer has returned the product,  
and

updating the reports of sales of product from retailers to consumers maintained by  
the inventory management system.

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13. A system for distributing products while utilizing a wide area network,  
comprising:

an inventory management system for receiving and maintaining information on  
transfers of products from manufacturers to retailers, information on transfers of products  
from retailers to consumers, and payment information from retailers and consumers,  
wherein the inventory management system is designed to interact with consumers through  
a web based interface, and

a server for maintaining and operating the inventory management system, the server  
being capable of transmitting orders for products received from consumers to selected  
retailers, and the server being further capable of interacting with an inventory management  
system.

14. The system of claim 13 further comprising:

a terminal located at a retailer, wherein the terminal is capable of providing  
inventory information to a user using a method comprising the steps of:

receiving a request for inventory information on a product from the user,  
transmitting the request to the inventory management system,

receiving inventory information from the inventory management system, and displaying the inventory information to the user.

5 15. The system of claim 14 wherein the inventory information comprises a location of an alternate retailer that has physical inventory of the product.

16. A method of distributing products, using a wide area network, comprising the steps of:

10 maintaining records of product shipments from manufacturers to retailers and product sales from retailers to consumers in an inventory management system,

accepting a request for a product from a consumer with a specific location, transmit the request to the inventory management system,

15 identifying a retailer that has stock of the product, wherein the identification is accomplished by identifying retailers that are in close physical proximity to the location of the consumer, in a manner that progresses from retailers that are closest to the location to retailers that are further away from the location, until a retailer that is in closest physical proximity to the location of the consumer and has existing stock of the product is identified, and

20 transmitting the request from the inventory management system to the retailer for subsequent fulfillment of the request.

17. The method of claim 16 wherein the inventory management system communicates with consumers using an interface chosen from the group consisting of a web site, a wireless communications interface, and a telephonic interface.

5 18. A method of providing sales statistics to manufacturers and retailers, comprising the steps of:

receiving shipment information on products shipping from manufacturers to retailers,

receiving sales information on products provided to consumers by retailers,

10 maintaining the shipment information and the sales information in a database, and

analyzing the shipment information and the sales information to determine statistics on actual sales to consumers.

15 19. The method of claim 18 further comprising the step of:

providing the statistics on actual sales to manufacturers or retailers requesting the statistics.

20. The method of claim 18 further comprising the step of:

categorizing the actual sales to consumers by geographic territories.